If You Knew
Then
What I Know
Now

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Ryan Van Meter
at pretending. Staring at her so hard that my vision blurred, I
waited for her answer. On the screen in front of her, I imagined
the bricks falling faster and faster, and how at some point, she
wouldn't be able to keep up. Which was the tough secret of that
kind of game—the better you got at it, the harder it was.

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If You Knew Then
What I Know Now

In your sixth-grade social studies class, fourth hour, when
Mrs. Perry assigns the group project on European World
Capitals, don't look at Mark. Don't look at Jared. See if there's
another group you can get into, the quiet girl who sits in front of
you needs someone to work with too. If you could avoid working
on this project with those two boys, you could avoid all of this.

If you do end up in a group with Mark and Jared, you
should insist that you meet at the library. If you could meet at
the library, then they couldn't do what they are planning to do.
If you do agree to meet with them at Mark's house, then I don't
know what to tell you. If you meet there, it's probably all going
to happen the way it's going to happen.

You will show up at Mark's. His sister will answer the door.
Your backpack will weigh down on your back, and his dad will
be watching football in the living room but you don't see him,
you only hear the dull roar of the TV crowd. His sister will point
you down the hallway. "First room on the right," she will say,
"across from the bathroom." You'll knock on the closed door.
You'll think it's odd that the door is closed. They know you're coming over. They know it's the day before the project is due. They know all of this. You will hear whispering on the other side of the door, and then it's swung open and Mark stands there, smiling. Jared is flung across the bed reading a magazine. The television glows in the corner. A video game is on, but the action is paused, a figure with winged shoes and a bow and arrow frozen in the middle of the arc of his jump. You've played this game before. You're good at it.

You'll let your backpack slump to the floor, unzip it, and pull out your books. You'll balance them in your lap, split open folders and pull out the assignment worksheet. "OK," you will say. You read over the assignment, the social studies project you're supposed to be working on, and you won't notice that they aren't listening to you. You won't notice they are mouthing words to each other. You won't know their plan is about to take shape.

And you won't know when they ask you to grab the box of Hostess cupcakes on the kitchen counter that they really don't care about the cupcakes. They just need you out of the room for a second. Of course you'll do it. You'll hop up and head to the kitchen. You're so excited to be over at Mark's house, hanging out with other boys. It's what your mother has been telling you to do for years: "You need to spend more time with boys. You should do more things that boys like to do. Why are you always just hanging around girls?" That's why what you see when you walk back in the room will be so confusing. You'll think, "This isn't what boys do, this isn't what I thought we were supposed to do."

The door will be shut when you return from the kitchen, though you'll know you certainly didn't shut it as you left. The rest of the house will be quiet, though you can still hear the football game from the living room. You will twist the knob and push open the door, and you will see them, on the bed. Jared will be under Mark, and they are turned so you can't see their faces, not the front of their faces anyway, and they are pretending to kiss. Mark's thick forearms will be stiffly curled around Jared, Jared's glasses will be folded, shoved in the corner of the windowsill. Both of them will peek under not-quite-closed eyelids. You will know right off they aren't really kissing because one of them—it's hard to tell if it's Mark or if it's Jared—will slide a flat palm in between their wet mouths so their lips can't touch. But they hope you will think they are kissing and that's the idea behind this. You will know they aren't kissing, but you will also know they want to pretend they are kissing. You will guess correctly when you think the project isn't going to be worked on today.

They will pull away after you've stood there for a second. You will start to step back, though you don't really know where to go, and they will say, "come back, come back in, we're sorry." You are back in the room, and they are sitting on Mark's navy-blue comforter holding hands. You'll feel immediately nervous,
your face will feel suddenly hot and pink. There’s no way now for you to cover your skin for them not to see the blushing color and for them not to see how you try to swallow, though your throat is too dry.

They will start talking about it, which you were afraid they would do. “What’s wrong?” Jared will ask you. Mark will ask, “Yeah, what’s wrong, Ryan?” They will look at each other and down at their hands, one flopped over the other. “We hope you don’t mind us doing this stuff. This is just something we do,” Jared says, and he will shrug as if it’s normal, as normal as note passing. “Don’t you ever do stuff like this, Ryan?” Mark will ask you, and here you are, at the point of all this. “You like to kiss guys, right, Ryan?” They are trying to get you to say things about yourself that you won’t be ready to say for several more years and that’s what will hurt the most about this afternoon. Hurt more than never hanging out with Mark or Jared again. Hurt more than anything anybody will say at school about what actually happened in Mark’s bedroom. It will hurt most when you realize they saw something in you that you thought you’d hidden so well you couldn’t even see it yourself anymore. They found something in you before you did. They saw it and there it will be, holding a box of cupcakes.

Years after, you will wonder how you managed to get through the rest of junior high and high school without ever speaking to Mark or Jared again, but somehow you will do it. In high school Jared will trade his brown glasses for contacts, and you will overhear girls in hallways whispering to each other about how pretty his eyes are. Mark will begin hanging out with the boys who wear dark jackets throughout the whole school year, no matter the weather, the boys who smoke in the sunken garden behind the school building, sitting on rotted railroad ties, sharing cigarettes every morning before the bell rings and after lunch. You will eventually find your own friends, and from that afternoon in sixth grade to the evening of your high-school graduation you will never tell another person about Mark and Jared’s kiss.

One day someone will ask you about the first time you kissed a boy, and you will think of this kiss, the one between Mark and Jared, the kiss that isn’t really a kiss and isn’t really yours. You could almost laugh. It will be funny to you, in a way, how important this kiss will be—it was the first kiss between two men, however young they were, you will have seen. Funny how of all the kisses in your life this is the one you will think most about. It will be the biggest kiss you ever saw.

Before you will ever be able to actually tell another person about this kiss, you will try to write it as fiction. You will try to recast it as a short story. You will have moved to Chicago by then, after college and college creative writing classes, and you will spend evenings sitting in cafés, working, bent over a legal pad, and one night, this kiss will come to you, and you will think, “now that’s a good story.” You will begin by vividly describing it, the class project and the bedroom door and the glasses on the
window sill. There will be something about watching it happen on the page, about having control over the afternoon and these three boys. You will try to rename them, but you will never find the perfect substitutes for the names Mark or Jared. Without Mark or Jared the story somehow won’t work. You will read over it, you will witness the afternoon again, and it won’t seem real. You will try to change the layout of Mark’s house, change the ages of the boys, move them through time, make them years older or younger. The boy in the story holding the cupcakes—even in the fictional version, you include the cupcakes—just standing there, blushing, his stunned silence, is something you yourself can’t believe. You will think this doesn’t seem real, it doesn’t sound like something that would really happen.

Finally, you decide to just tell it. It will be almost eleven years from that sixth-grade afternoon. You will sit with three close friends and together drink several bottles of wine. None of them will have gone to your high school and none of them will have heard of Mark or Jared. You will sit in an old armchair, a plastic cup hanging from your hand. Votive candles will be scattered on a coffee table, their dull lights reflecting across the bare hardwood floor in the dim apartment. When you begin to tell the story you will feel the rise of a familiar panic. There will be the dry throat and the same flushed and sweating neck. Your friends will watch your face turn. And it will feel silly, your body still affected, still intimidated. A man in his twenties afraid of two twelve-year-old boys on a bed, miles away and years gone.

If you can’t stop any of this, if you can wait sixteen years, it will end well, or at least, better than you’d guess. At your ten-year high-school reunion, near the night’s end, on the crowded patio, Jared will approach you.

At the reunion, throughout the evening, you will have noticed that most of the boys from your high school—the football players and basketball players, the class officers and the prom king—are quickly balding or already bald, and somehow all shorter. Everyone’s life is sort of rearranged: one of the football players walks on prosthetic feet now, and the class president is a Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader. You are taller than you were then and your classmates look at you and look again and tell you that you seem grown up. And instead of hiding a part of yourself from them like you did in school you will have decided to bring your boyfriend.

You stand next to him. The open bar is closed. Classmates make plans to meet at nearby bars, promise to e-mail each other, send letters, and exchange photos of children to keep in touch. Your best friend and your boyfriend are smoking cigarettes. You are standing outside with them on a patio overlooking a courtyard, waiting to walk back to your hotel room and look through the senior yearbook you brought, to point at pictures and talk about the faces. Out of the clump of classmates and spouses, Jared suddenly walks up to you. You already knew he was at the reunion, and you almost thought you’d made it
through the night without talking to him. He looks like he did
in high school—big and thick, a round chest, thick stump legs, a
spread-out face with large, wet eyes—only his skin is lined with
age. He has a wife; she’s extremely thin. Jared extends his hand,
and you shake it. He says “Hey, Ryan,” like he’s surprised to see
you. The patio is very dark. Classmates crowd around you both,
squeezing the space away, their faces covered in shadows. Jared’s
name tag—like your name tag, with a scan of your senior picture
printed on it—is stuck to his shirt, a crease down its center and
dotted by drops of beer.

Your boyfriend and your best friend drop away, leaning to
each other in their own conversation; they won’t notice Jared.
He asks you the customary questions, the ones answered this
evening already a hundred times. Where do you live now,
how are you doing, what are you doing, do you like Chicago?
You tell him, wondering why he’s talking to you. You are still
afraid of Jared. Or at least you are still afraid of that Jared,
the one with the glasses on an afternoon in sixth grade. The
corstatement comes to an end, once you’ve exhausted the usual,
casual exchange. Then Jared lifts his big arm to your shoulder.
He says: “Hey, listen, you probably won’t even remember what
I am talking about, but there was this time, at fuckin’ Mark’s
house, when—” and you stop him.

“I know what you’re going to say.”
“You do?”

“I know exactly what you’re going to say.” You are
surprised, too.

“I don’t have to say it?”

“No,” you say, and actually you don’t want him to say it,
you don’t want to hear him tell it. It would seem too easy, too
obvious for this tormentor to apologize at your reunion. You
wouldn’t even test this moment on the page—if it were a story
you could write—because no reader would believe it. “It couldn’t
really happen this way,” you think, standing in front of Jared,
watching it happen.

“Well, look, I just want to say that what we did, it was
stupid. I’m really sorry. We were just asshole kids.”

You think it’s strange that you assumed you were the only
boy hurt by that kiss in Mark’s bedroom. But you see that Jared
carries that day with him like you do; he carries a shame not very
different from yours. Somehow you’ve shared a scar this many
years. You say to Jared that just knowing he remembers that
afternoon is enough. He thanks you and grabs you again. On
your shoulder his hand feels a little like the warmth of comfort,
and a little like the squeeze of danger.
man worked for thirty years; and a reconciliation with long-lost family members. Engel noted that these episodes marked periods of extreme excitement, loss of control, or "giving up." Many involved the sense that the person "no longer has, or no longer believes that he has, mastery or control over the situation, or even over himself," Engel wrote. In other words, when your sense of self unravels, your actual self can too.

Writing affirmations seems to offer some protection from these slings and arrows. In one study that Cohen and Sherman cited, both affirmed and non-affirmed people were shown a live caged tarantula. The affirmed group correctly judged the distance between themselves and the spider. Non-affirmed people saw the threat as physically closer than it really was. When the story we've told ourselves about who we are is threatened, the world feels more dangerous. Things can look more dire, more risky, more hopeless than they are. That's a feeling I remember clearly. It's one I'm sure my grandma knew well.

Culture-bound or not, depression is a complex beast. Even today there are no known physiological causes, despite our perpetual assumption that these will soon be found. There is no biological test you can take for it. That's why, for me, the intersection of narrative and neurology is where a key piece of this puzzle can be found.

Surely nothing as simple as a notebook and a pencil could have saved my grandma, just as when things turned darkest for me, my wife had to intervene. Yet I still feel lucky that I became a writer when I did. Because for years those journal pages helped me hold myself together when the world pulled me apart. They helped me figure out who I was, and the distance between the two.

But most important, I see now that in all those years when I thought I was writing one kind of story, I was writing another. Now when I open my journal, I know which story that is. I know why I'm writing it. And I know the end is still a long way off.

THE HEART-WORK
Writing About Trauma as a Subversive Act • BY MELISSA FEBOS

In a recent nonfiction workshop I taught at Sarah Lawrence College, a female student cringed when I suggested she include more of her own story in an essay. The narrative experiment was met with a suggestion of sexual trauma, but quickly shifted into a more lyrical and analytic musing on the general subject. She frowned. "But I don't want to seem self-absorbed. You know, navel-gazing." The rest of the room—all women—nodded. It is a concern I have heard from countless students and peers, and which I always greet with a combination of bafflement and frustration. Since when did telling our own stories and deriving their insights become so reviled? It doesn't matter if the story is your own, I tell them over and over, only that you tell it well. We must always tell stories so that their specificity reveals some universal truth.

And yet. How many times have I been privy to conversations among other writers in which we sneer at the very concept? We compulsively assure one another that writing isn't about enacting kind of therapy. How gross! We are intellectuals. We are artists. And the assumption is that these occupations preclude emotional self-examination or healing. "I mean, you can't expect people to be interested in your diary," a friend and fellow teacher recently exclaimed. I nodded. What kind of monstrous narcissist would make that mistake?

I am complicit. I have committed this betrayal of my own experience innumerable times. But I am done agreeing when my peers spit on the idea of writing as transformation, as catharsis, as—dare I say it—therapy. Tell me, who is writing in their therapeutic diary and then dashing it off to be published? I don't know who these supposedly self-indulgent (and extravagantly well-connected) narcissists are. But I suspect that when people denigrate them in the abstract, they are picturing women. I'm finished.
as a have when
I feel
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They

referring to stories of body and sex and
gender and violence and joy and child-
hood and family as “navel-gazing.”

At a recent writers conference, dur-
ing a panel of literary magazine edi-
tors, a female audience member posed
a question about the potential audience
for her story of trauma survival. One
of the male editors rolled his eyes and
shrugged. “I mean, I’m not sure we
need any more of those stories.” The
other panelists nodded in consensus:
Stories like hers belonged on Oprah’s
talk show, not in the hallowed realm
of literary prose. Everyone knows we
don’t need another one of those. The
goofing victim is already so
crowded. So goache.

Later that day, while serving on a
panel of memoirists, I polled the
audience—a room packed with a few
hundred readers and writers. I asked
for a show of hands: “Who here has
experienced an act of violence, abuse,

disempowerment, sexual ag-
ger, harassment, or humiliation?”

The room fell silent as the air filled
with hands.

In response to a surge of popular
memories, William Gass, in a 1994
issue of Harper’s, asked, “Are there
any motives for the enterprise that
aren’t tainted with conceit or a desire
for revenge or a wish for justification?
To halo a sinner’s head? To puff an ego
already inflated past safety?” He went
on: “To have written an autobiography
is already to have made yourself a
monster. . . . Why is it so exciting to say,
now that everyone knows it anyway, ‘I
was born. . . . I was born. . . . I was born?’”

It is an argument that has been made
for centuries, and that I have heard all
my writing life.

It is the reason that I did not want
to write a memoir. At twenty-six I was an
MFA student in fiction, deep into what
I believed was a Very Important Novel
about addiction and female sexuality.

Then I took a nonfiction craft class for
which we were asked to write a short
memoir. Though the content of my
novel drew heavily from my own ex-
perience, I had never written any kind
of nonfiction. The twenty-page essay I
drafted about my years as a professional
dominatrix was the most urgent thing I
had ever written. When he read it, my
professor insisted that I drop whatever
I was working on and write a memoir.

I cringed. Who was I, a twenty-six-
year-old woman, a former junkie and
sex worker, to presume that strangers
should find my life interesting? I had
already learned that there were few
more daunting presumptions than that
of a young woman thinking her own
story might be meaningful. Besides, I
was writing a Very Important Novel.
Just like Jonathan Franzen or Philip
Roth or Hemingway, those men of re-
nowned humility.

“No way,” I told my professor. I was
determined to stick to my more hum-
ble presumption that strangers might
be interested in a story made up by a
twenty-six-year-old former junkie sex
worker.

Do you see how easy it is to poke
holes in this logic?

But the story wouldn’t leave me
alone. So I wrote it. And it was urgent,
but not easy. In order to write that
book, I had to walk back through my
most mystifying choices and excavate
events for which I had been numb on
the first go-round.

That book was about being a sex
worker and recovering from heroin
addiction. It was about desire, shame,
bodies, drugs, and money. It was an
intellectual inquiry into these topics
as much as it was a psychological and
emotional reckoning. In hindsight, I
can say that the compulsion to write
it was an expression of my need to un-
derstand what the connections were
among those things. To answer my
own questions about why a girl from

a loving family ended up shooting
speedballs andspanking men for a
living, and how the power of secrecy
could become a prison. I wrote it be-
cause I wanted to show the strangers
who shared those experiences that they
were not alone.

I didn’t write a memoir to free my-
self, though in the process I did.

In the 1980s, social psychologist
James Pennebaker conducted some
now famous studies on his theory of
“expressive writing.” Pennebaker
asked participants in his experimental
group to write about a past trauma,
expressing their deepest feelings
surrounding it. In contrast, control
participants were asked to write as ob-
jectively as possible about neutral top-
ics without revealing their emotions or
opinions. Both groups wrote for fifteen
minutes for four consecutive days.

Some of the participants in the ex-
perimental group found the exercise
upsetting. All of them found it valu-
able. Monitoring over the subsequent
year revealed that those participants
made significantly fewer visits to phy-
sicians. Pennebaker’s research has since
been replicated numerous times and his
results confirmed: Expressive writing
about trauma strengthens the immune
system, decreases obsessive thinking,
and contributes to the overall health of
the writers. And this is after only four
days of fifteen-minute sessions.

Let’s face it: If you write about your
wounds, it is therapy. Of course, the
writing done in those fifteen minutes
was surely terrible by artistic standards.
But it is a logical fallacy to conclude
that any writing with therapeutic ef-
fect is terrible. You don’t have to be into
therapy to be healed by writing. Being
healed does not have to be your goal.
But to oppose the very idea of it is non-
sensical, unless you consider what such
a bias reveals about our values as a cul-
ture. Knee-jerk bias backed by flimsy
logic and bad science has always been the disguise of our national prejudices.

That these topics of the body, the emotional interior, the domestic, the sexual, the relational are all undervalued in intellectual literary terms, and are all associated with the female spheres of being is not a coincidence. What I mean is, this bias against “personal writing” is a sexist mechanism, founded on the false binary between the emotional (female) and the intellectual (male), and intended to subordinate the former.

That is, Karl Ove Knausgaard is a genius, a risk-taker, while all my female graduate students are terrified to write about being mothers for fear that they will be deemed (or, that they already are) vacuous narcissists. Or, as Maggie Nelson, in her latest book, The Argonauts, says of a man inquiring how she could possibly pen a book on the subject of cruelty while pregnant: “Leave it to the old patriarchal white guy to call the lady speaker back to her body, so that no one misses the spectacle of that wild oxymoron, the pregnant woman who thinks. Which is really just a pumped-up version of that more general oxymoron, a woman who thinks.”

I suspect I could write something relevant and dynamic and political and beautiful and intellectual about my own navel. And I don’t think it’s a stretch to wonder if the navel as the locus of all this disdain has some faint thing to do with its connection to birth, and body, and the female.

ACKNOWLEDGING all of this will not get your book published. Being healed by writing does not excuse you from the insanely hard work of making art. There are plenty of mediocre memoirs out there, just as there are plenty of mediocre novels. I labored endlessly to craft my memoir. But after it was published, I still fielded insinuations that I had gotten away with publishing my diary. Interviewers asked only about my experiences and never about my craft. At readings, I would be billed on posters as “Melissa Febo, former dominatrix” alongside my co-reader, “[insert male writer name], poet.” Even some friends, after reading the book, would write to me to exclaim, “The writing! It was so good,” as if that were a happy accident accompanying my diarist’s transcription.

We are telling the stories that no one else can tell, and we are giving this proof of our survival to one another.

Writing about your personal experiences is not easier than other kinds of writing. In order to write that book, I had to invest the time and energy to conduct research and craft plot, scenes, description, dialogue, pacing—all the writer’s jobs, and I had to destroy my own self-image and face some unpalatable truths about my own accountability. It was the hardest thing I’d ever done. It made me a better person, and it made a better book.

Navel-gazing is not for the faint of heart. The risk of honest self-appraisal requires bravery. To place our flawed selves in the context of this magnificent, broken world is the opposite of narcissism, which is building a self-image that pleases you. For many years, I kept a quote from Rilke’s Letters to a Young Poet tucked over my desk: “The work of the eyes is done. Go now and do the heart-work on the images imprisoned within you.”

LISTEN to me: It is not gauche to write about trauma. It is subversive. The stigma of victimhood is a timeworn tool of oppressive powers to gaslight the people they subjugate into believing that by naming their disempowerment they are being dramatic, whining, attention-grabbing, or beating a dead horse. Believe me, I wish this horse were dead. To name just one of many such statistics in a grossly underreported set of crimes: The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey recently found that 46.4 percent of lesbians, 74.9 percent of bisexual women, and 43.3 percent of heterosexual women have been the victims of sexual violence.

But we shouldn’t write about it because people are fatigued by stories about trauma? No. We have been discouraged from writing about it because it makes people uncomfortable. Because a patriarchal society wants its victims to be silent. Because shame is an effective method of silencing.

I have just finished writing a second book about my own experience. It’s called Abandon Me, and it’s about having a sea captain father, about loving women, about being annihilated and invented by love and sex. It is an exercise in applying my intellect, and the intellects of other thinkers—philosophers, psychologists, holy people, poets—to the raw matter of my own abandonments. It is about having abandonment issues.

This sort of admission might make you cry. But it might also make you feel, not with a weird emotional intimacy, but with the right, with the layered, and the bedrock. With the whole, the whole being, and the self; the self that is not easily defined, the real one, not the false one, the vulnerable and the brave. It’s the entire thing, without the fragile layers, and you knew you were the wrong one to write it, the wrong one to want it, to try to do something about the pain of it.
you cringe. But white straight male writers are writing about the same things—they are just overlaying them with a plot about baseball, or calling their work fiction. Men write about their daddy issues constantly, and I don't see anyone accusing them of navel-gazing. I am happy to read those books. I just wish that male authors—along with the greater reading populace—were not discouraged from reading such books by women. That women were not discouraged from writing them.

The new book is a collection of linked essays, and I have never worked so hard, sentence by sentence, image by image, on anything. But I struggled with the title essay, which, at over 150 pages, is more than half the book and tells the story of a time when I lost myself in love, acted in ways I would never have believed until they happened.

I showed an early draft of the essay to a close friend. After reading it, she said: “This is a very pretty story, but this is not what happened. If you want to tell the real story, you are going to have to be more honest.” My heart sank. I knew she was right. I had included only the parts that I felt safe revealing. I had hidden the ugliest parts. When I thought about taking her advice, a cold fear surged through me. “I am not allowed to write this,” I thought. “No one can know how profoundly I lost myself.” But I knew that she was right. So I rewrote it. I faced the true version that I had tried to avoid. Because it was a better story, and because I wanted to be free.

What I’m saying is, don’t avoid yourself. The story that comes calling might be your own, and it might not go away if you don’t open the door. I don’t believe in writers block. I only believe in fear. And you can be afraid and still write something. No one has to read it, though when you’re done you might want someone to. One of the epigraphs of my book is a quote from the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott: “It is joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found.” The book I’ve written is about secrets, too. About my father’s father, who terrorized his family; about my mother’s father, who was mad. About my biological father, his father, and his grandfather—who lied on a census and said he was Polish, instead of native. It’s about the legacy of those secrets, how they ruined us for generations, how they have formed me.

To William Gass’s argument, “To have written an autobiography is already to have made yourself a monster,” I say that refusing to write your story can make you into a monster. Or perhaps more accurately, we are already monsters. And to deny the monstrous is to deny its beauty, its meaning, its necessary devastation.

Transforming my secrets into art has transformed me. And I believe that stories like these have the power to transform the world. That is the point of literature, or at least that’s what I tell my students. We are writing the history that we could not find in any other book. We are telling the stories that no one else can tell, and we are giving this proof of our survival to one another.

What I mean is, tell me about your navel. Tell me about your rape. Tell me about your mad love affair, how you forgot and then remembered yourself. Tell me about your hands, the things they have done and held and hit and let go of. Tell me about your drunk father and your sister who lost her mind. Give them whatever names you want.

Don’t tell me that the experiences of a vast majority of our planet’s human population are marginal, are not relevant, are not political. Don’t tell me that you think there’s not enough room for another story about sexual abuse, motherhood, or racism. The only way to make room is to drag all our stories into that room. That’s how it gets bigger.

You write it, and I will read it. ☃️
Why We Write About Ourselves

Twenty Memoirists on Why They Expose Themselves (and Others) in the Name of Literature

Edited by Meredith Maran
Pat Conroy’s Wisdom for Memoir Writers

• A memoir is not a newspaper article. It’s not expected to be word-for-word true. If you have to write it perfectly, the story won’t be told, and the most important thing is that you tell your story.
• Don’t hang around with writers. We’re all crazy and we won’t do your writing any good.
• Memoirs hurt people. Secrets hurt people. The question to ask yourself is, if you tell your story, will it do enough good to make it worth hurting people?

A.M. Homes’s Wisdom for Memoir Writers

• Write the most honest, truthful version of your story you can. That first draft is your draft. Don’t run away from whatever comes up for you when you do. Explore it.
• There’s a huge decision to make between writing a story and publishing it. Don’t write with the assumption that you’ll publish it; that’s not why we write memoir. You’re writing it to document your life and your story. If anything else comes of it, make decisions accordingly.
• With a memoir, as with a novel, the key is trying to understand what your “characters” saw and felt. Using the conventions of good storytelling—time, place, voice, dialogue—to illuminate a story is really important to moving the story along.

Anne Lamott’s Wisdom for Memoir Writers

• Don’t wait for inspiration. Point your finger at your head and march yourself to your desk. It’s a great dream to do something that connects us with antiquity and with last week’s news. So don’t be a big whiny baby. Writer up and write.
• Everything that’s happened to you is all yours. Just write it. You can worry about the legal issues and the next bad holiday dinner later. Tell the story that’s in you to tell.
• All writing is collaborative, including memoir. Ask lots of people to help you remember details—people who were there for the experiences you had, and people who had similar experiences. Sometimes only someone else can remember what the stairs behind the kitchen looked like.

Dani Shapiro’s Wisdom for Memoir Writers

• Know your reasons for embarking on this memoir. If one of your reasons is revenge, stop. Writing from rage, or from the sting of betrayal, or whatever it might be that is motivating you, will produce an incoherent story. Be sure you have enough distance from your material so that you are able to think of yourself as a character.
• Don’t worry about what people will think as you’re writing a first draft. This manuscript will not magically fly from your desk and onto the shelves of your local bookstore. You’ll have time to worry about people’s feelings once you’ve gotten a draft down. But if you begin with this kind of fretting, you’ll stop yourself before you’ve even started.
• Remember that you’re telling a story. Not everything belongs. Understand that you may write other memoirs down the road, but come to know the frame around this story. Just because it happened to you does not make it relevant. Choose carefully what to put in and what to leave out.
Cheryl Strayed’s Wisdom for Memoir Writers

- The most powerful strand in memoir is not expressing your originality. It's tapping into your universality. This isn't to say you shouldn't be original in your writing—you are the only one who can write that universal experience in just that way. Trust that.
- Know that the writing will lead you into places you can't imagine you'll go. In my experience, writing comes from a place beneath intellectual consciousness. The only way to get to that place is by writing. Trust the magic of that process.
- Good writing is built on craft and heart. Another way of saying it is you must do your work and it must cost you everything to do it.

Edmund White’s Wisdom for Memoir Writers

- Cut to the chase. Don't burden yourself with lots of exposition. What you imagine is the connective tissue can oftentimes be dropped. See if maybe a phrase or two can do it.
- You can foreshorten lots of boring dialogue by paraphrasing: “She told me the story of her marriage.” Sedaris will have conversations between his six-year-old self and his mother, and it's funny, but it isn't very plausible that he'd remember what he said when he was six. I buy it only because it's funny, and an important plot point isn't hanging on it.
- Sit in a café by yourself, and listen to the people in the next booth. You're clear about what's going on. You know they're fighting about sex, or fidelity, or money. You don't know who Martha is, but you get it. Apply that to your writing.
- Use some realistic techniques so you don't just have voices talking in the dark. Make your reader see and smell and feel things by using sensual details.

Jesmyn Ward’s Wisdom for Memoir Writers

- Unlike with fiction, it's easiest to write a memoir from an outline. You have your experience and your truth to draw from, but there's so much there. You're whistling away at your life to find the story underneath. An outline helps.
- You get the most powerful material when you write toward whatever hurts. Don't avoid it. Don't run from it. Don't write toward what's easy. We recognize our humanity in those most difficult moments that people share.
- Whatever kind of writing you've done will help you write a memoir. If you've done that work, you have those tools, and you bring them to the work. They lead you. They guide you. They inform you when you're writing.
The first time I cheated on my husband, my mother had been dead for exactly one week. I was in a café in Minneapolis watching a man. He watched me back. He was slightly pudgy, with jet-black hair and skin so white it looked as if he'd powdered it. He stood and walked to my table and sat down without asking. He wanted to know if I had a cat. I folded my hands on the table, steadying myself; I was shaking, nervous at what I would do. I was raw, fragile, vicious with grief. I would do anything.

"Yes," I said.

"I thought so," he said slowly. He didn't take his eyes off me. I rolled the rings around on my fingers. I was wearing two wedding bands, my own and my mother's. I'd taken hers off her hand after she died. It was nothing fancy: sterling silver, thick and braided.

"You look like the kind of girl who has a cat."

"How's that?" I asked.

He didn't answer. He just kept looking at me steadily, as if he knew everything about me, as if he owned me. I felt distinctly that he might be a murderer.

"Are you mature?" he asked intently.

I didn't know what he meant. I still don't. I told him that I was.

"Well, then, prove it and walk down the street with me."

We left the café, his hand on my arm. I had monstrous bruises on my knees from how I'd fallen on them after I walked into my mother's hospital room and first saw her dead. He liked these. He said he'd been admiring them from across the room. They were what had drawn him to me. Also, he liked my boots. He thought I looked intriguing. He thought I looked mature. I was twenty-two. He was older, possibly thirty. I didn't ask his name; he didn't ask mine. I walked with him to a parking lot behind a building. He stopped and pressed me against a brick wall and kissed me, but then he wasn't kissing me. He was biting me. He bit my lips so hard I screamed.

"You lying cunt," he whispered into my ear. "You're not mature." He flung me away from him and left.

I stood, unnerving, stunned. The inside of my mouth began to bleed softly. Tears filled my eyes. I want my mother, I thought. My mother is dead. I thought this every hour of every day for a very long time: I want my mother. My mother is dead.

It was only a kiss, and barely that, but it was, anyway, a crossing. When I was a child I witnessed a leaf unfurl in a single motion. One second it was a fist, the next an open hand. I never forgot it, seeing so much happen so fast. And this was like that—the end of one thing, the beginning of another: my life as a slut.

When my mother was diagnosed with cancer, my husband, Mark, and I took an unspoken sexual hiatus. When she died seven weeks later, I couldn't bear for Mark to touch me. His hands on my body made me weep. He went down on me in the gentliest of ways. He didn't expect anything in return. He didn't make me feel that I had to come. I would soak in a hot bath, and he would lean into it to touch me. He wanted to make me feel good, better. He loved me, and he had loved my mother. Mark and I were an insanely young, insanely happy, insanely in love married couple. He wanted to help. No, no, no, I said, but then sometimes I relented. I closed my eyes and tried to relax. I breathed deep and attempted to fake it. I rolled over on my stomach so I wouldn't have to look at him. He fucked me and I sobbed uncontrollably.

"Keep going," I said to him. "Just finish." But he wouldn't. He couldn't. He loved me. Which was mysteriously, unfortunately, precisely the problem.

I wanted my mother.

We aren't supposed to want our mothers that way, with the pining intensity of sexual love, but I did, and if I couldn't have her, I couldn't have anything. Most of all I couldn't have pleasure, not even for a moment. I was bereft, in agony, destroyed over her death. To experience sexual joy, it seemed, would have been to negate that reality. And more, it would have been to betray my mother, to be disloyal to the person she had been to me. A survivor of her marriage to my troubled father, and then a single mother afterward, working hard to raise my brother and sister and me. My stepfather had loved her and been a good husband to her for ten years, but shortly after she died, he'd fallen in love with someone else. His new girlfriend and her two daughters moved into my mother's house, took her photos off the walls, erased her. I needed my stepfather to be the
kind of man who would suffer for my mother, unable to go on, who would carry a torch. And if he wouldn’t do it, I would.

We are not allowed this. We are allowed to be deeply into basketball, or Buddhism, or Star Trek, or jazz, but we are not allowed to be deeply sad. Grief is a thing that we are encouraged to “let go of,” to “move on from,” and we are told specifically how this should be done. Countless well-intentioned friends, distant family members, hospital workers, and strangers I met at parties recited the famous five stages of grief to me: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. I was alarmed by how many people knew them, how deeply this single definition of the grieving process had permeated our cultural consciousness. Not only was I supposed to feel these five things, I was meant to feel them in that order and for a fairly prescribed amount of time. I did not deny. I did not get angry. I didn’t bargain, become depressed, or accept. I Evaluate. I suck. Not my husband, but people I hardly knew, and in that I found a glimmer of relief. The people I messed around with did not have names; they had titles: the Prematurely Graying Wilderness Guide, the Technically Still a Virgin Mexican Teenager, the Formerly Gay Organic Farmer, the Quietly Perverse Poet, the Failing but Still Trying Massage Therapist, the Terribly Large Texas Bull Rider, the Recently Unemployed Graduate of Juilliard, the Actually Pretty Famous Drummer Guy. Most of these people were men; some were women. With them, I was not in mourning; I wasn’t even me. I was happy and sexy and impetuous and fun. I was wild and enigmatic and terrifically good in bed. I didn’t care about them or have orgasms. We didn’t have heart-to-heart talks. I asked them questions about their lives, and they told me everything and asked few questions in return; they knew nothing about me. Because of this, most of them believed they were falling instantly, madly in love with me.

I did what I did with these people, and then I returned home to Mark, weak-kneed and wet, bleary-eyed and elated. I’m alive, I thought in that giddy, postsex daze. My mother’s death has taught me to live each day as if it were my last, I said to myself, latching on to the nearest cliché, and the one least true. I didn’t think to ask: What if it had been my last day? Did I wish to be sucking the cock of an Actually Pretty Famous Drummer Guy? I didn’t think to ask that because I didn’t want to think. When I did think, I thought, I cannot continue to live without my mother.

I lied—sometimes to the people I messed around with (some of them, if they’d known I was married, would not have wanted to mess around with me), but mostly to Mark. I was not proud of myself. I was in love with him and wanted to be faithful to him and wanted to want to have sex with him, but something in me wouldn’t let me do it. We got into the habit of fucking in the middle of the night, both of us waking from a sound sleep to the reality of our bodies wet and hard and in the act. The sex lasted about thirty seconds, and we would almost always both come. It was intensely hot and strange and surreal and darkly funny and ultimately depressing. We never knew who started it. Neither of us recalled waking, reaching for each other. It was a shard of passion, and we held on to it. For a while it got us through.

We like to say how things are, perhaps because we hope that’s how they might actually be. We attempt to name, identify, and define the most mysterious of matters: sex, love, marriage, monogamy, infidelity, death, loss, grief. We want these things to have an order, an internal logic, and we also want them to be connected to one another. We want it to be true that if we cheat on our spouse, it means we no longer want to be married to him or her. We want it to be true that if someone we love dies, we simply have to pass through a series of phases, like an emotional obstacle course from which we will emerge happy and content, unharmed and unchanged.

After my mother died, everyone I knew wanted to tell me either about the worst breakup they’d had or all the people they’d known who died. I listened to a long, traumatic story about a girlfriend who suddenly moved to Ohio and to stories of grandfathers and old friends and people who lived down the block who were no longer among us. Rarely was this helpful.

Occasionally I came across people who’d had the experience of losing someone whose death made them think, I cannot continue to live. I recognized these people: their postures, where they rested their eyes as they spoke, the expressions they let onto their faces and the ones they kept off. These people consoling me beyond measure. I felt profoundly connected to them, as if we were a tribe.

It’s surprising how relatively few of them there were. People don’t die anymore, not the way they used to. Children survive childhood; women, the labor of birth; men, their work. We survive influenza and infection, cancer and heart attacks. We keep living on and on: 80, 90, 103. We live younger, too; frightfully more, not the way they used to. Children survive childhood; women, the labors of birth; men, their work. We survive influenza and infection, cancer and heart attacks. We keep living on and on: 80, 90, 103. We live younger, too; frightfully

And there is a difference. Dying is not your girlfriend moving to Ohio. Grief is not the day after your neighbor’s funeral, when you felt extremely blue. It is not the day after your neighbor’s funeral, when you felt extremely blue.
doesn't fulfill the needs of today's diverse and far-flung affections; indeed, it probably never did. It leaves out the steprelations, the long-term lovers, the chosen family of a tight circle of friends, and it includes the blood relations we perhaps never honestly loved. But its intentions are true. And, undeniably, for most of us that list of eight does come awfully close. We love and care for oodles of people, but only a few of them, if they died, would make us believe we could not continue to live. Imagine if there were a boat upon which you could put only four people, and everyone else known and beloved to you would then cease to exist. Who would you put on that boat? It would be painful, but how quickly you would decide: You and you and you and you, get in. The rest of you, good-bye.

For years, I was haunted by the idea of this imaginary boat of life, by the desire to exchange my mother's fate for one of the many living people I knew. I would be sitting across the table from a dear friend. I loved her, him, each one of these people. Some I said I loved like family. But I would look at them and think, Why couldn't it have been you who had died instead? You, good-bye.

I didn't often sleep with Mark, but I slept beside him, or tried to. I dreamed incessantly about my mother. There was a theme. Two or three times a week she made me kill her. She commanded me to do it, and I sobbed and got down on my knees, begging her not to make me, but she would not relent. In each dream, like a good daughter, I ultimately complied. I tied her to a tree in our front yard, poured gasoline over her head, and lit her on fire. I made her run down the dirt road that passed by the house where I'd grown up, and I ran her over with my truck; I dragged her body, caught on a jagged piece of metal underneath, until it came loose, and then I put my truck in reverse and ran her over again. I took a miniature baseball bat and beat her to death with it. I forced her into a hole I'd dug and kicked dirt and stones on top of her and buried her alive. These dreams were not surreal. They took place in the plain light of day. They were the documentary films of my subconscious and felt as real to me as life. My truck was really my truck; our front yard was our actual front yard; the miniature baseball bat sat in our closet among the umbrellas. I didn't wake from these dreams crying; I woke shrieking. Mark grabbed me and held me. He wetted a washcloth with cool water and put it over my face. These dreams went on for months, years, and I couldn't shake them. I also couldn't shake my infidelities. I couldn't shake my grief.

What was there to do with me? What did those around me do? They did what I would have done, what we all do when faced with the prospect of someone else's sorrow: they tried to talk me out of it, neutralize it, tamp it down, make it relative and therefore not so bad. We narrate our own lesser stories of loss in an attempt to demonstrate that the sufferer is not really so alone. We make grossly inexact comparisons and hope that they will do. In short, we insist on ignoring the precise nature of deep loss because there is nothing we can do to change it, and by doing so we strip it of its meaning, its weight, its own fiercely original power.

The first person I knew who died was a casual friend of my mother's, named Barb. Barb was in her early thirties, and I was ten. Her hair was brown and shoulder length, her skin clear and smooth as a bar of soap. She had the kind of tall body that made you acutely aware of the presence of its bones: a long, knobby nose; wide, thin hips; a jaw too pointed to be considered beautiful. Barb got into her car and started the engine. Her car was parked in a garage and all the doors were closed and she had stuffed a Minnesota Vikings cap into a small hole in the garage wall to make it even more airtight. My mother explained this to me in detail: the Vikings hat, the sitting in the car with the garage door closed on purpose. I was more curious than sad. But in the months that followed, I thought of Barb often. I came to care for her. I nurtured an inflated sense of my connection to her. Recently, another acquaintance of mine died. He was beautiful and young and free-spirited and one hell of a painter. He went hiking one day on the Oregon coast and was never seen again. Over the course of my life, I have known other people who've died. Some of them have died the way we hoped they would—old, content, at their time; others, the way we hoped they wouldn't—by murder or suicide, in accidents, or too young of illnesses. The deaths of those people made me sad, afraid, and angry; they made me question the fairness of the world, the existence of God, and the nature of my own existence. But they did not make me suffer. They did not make me think, I cannot continue to live. In fact, in their deaths I felt more deeply connected to them, not because I grieved them but because I wanted to attach myself to what is interesting. It is interesting to be in a Chinese restaurant and see a poster of the smiling face of an acquaintance, who is one hell of a painter, plastered on the front door. It is interesting to be able to say, I know him, to feel that a part of something important and awful and big. The more connections like this we have, the more interesting we are.

There was nothing interesting to me about my mother's death. I did not want to attach myself to it. It was her life that I clung to, her very, very interesting life. When she died, she was about to graduate from college, and so was I. We had started together. Her college was in Duluth, mine in Minneapolis. After a lifetime of struggle and sacrifice, my mother was coming into her own. She wanted to major in six subjects, but the school wouldn't let her, so she settled on two.

My mother had become pregnant when she was nineteen and immediately married my father, a steelworker in western Pennsylvania when the steel plants were shutting down, a coal miner's son born about the time that the coal was
running out. After three children and nine years of violence, my mother left him. My father had recently moved us to a small town near Minneapolis in pursuit of a job prospect. When they divorced, he went back to Pennsylvania, but my mother stayed. She worked as a waitress and in a factory that made small plastic containers that would eventually hold toxic liquids. We lived in apartment complexes full of single mothers whose children sat on the edges of grocery store parking lots. We received free government cheese and powdered milk, food stamps and welfare checks.

After a few years, my mother met my stepfather, and when he fell off a roof on the job and hurt his back, they took the $12,000 settlement and spent every penny on forty acres of land in northern Minnesota. There was no house; no one had ever had a house on this land. My stepfather built a one-room tar-paper shack, and we lived in it while he and my mother built us a house from scrap wood and trees they cut down with the help of my brother, my sister, and me. We moved into the new house on Halloween night. We didn’t have electricity or running water or a phone or an indoor toilet. Years passed, and my mother was happy—happier than she’d ever been—but still, she hungered for more.

Just before she died, she was thinking about becoming a costume designer or a professor of history. She was profoundly interested in the American pioneers, the consciousness of animals, and the murders of women believed to be witches. She was looking into graduate school, though she feared that she was too old. She couldn’t believe, really, that she was even getting a degree. I’d had to convince her to go to college. She’d always read books but thought that she was basically stupid. To prepare, she shadowed me during my senior year of high school, doing all the homework that I was assigned. She photocopied my assignment sheets, wrote the papers I had to write, read the books. I graded her work, using my teacher’s marks as a guide. My mother was a shaky student at best.

She went to college and earned straight As.

She died on a Monday during spring break of our senior year. After her funeral, I immediately went back to school because she had begged me to do so. It was the beginning of a new quarter. In most of my classes, we were asked to introduce ourselves and say what we had done over the break. “My name is Cheryl,” I said. “I went to Mexico.” I lied not to protect myself but because it would have been rude not to. To express loss on that level is to cross a boundary, violate personal space, to impose emotion in a nonemotional place.

We did not always treat grief this way. Nearly every culture has a history, and some still have a practice, of mourning rituals, many of which involve changes in the dress or appearance of those in grief. The wearing of black clothing or mourning jewelry, hair cutting, and body scarification or ritual tattooing all made the grief-stricken immediately visible to the people around them. Although it is true that these practices were sometimes ridiculously restrictive and not always in the best interest of the mourner, it is also true that they gave us something of value. They imposed evidence of loss on a community and forced that community to acknowledge it. If, as a culture, we don’t bear witness to grief, the burden of loss is placed entirely upon the bereaved, while the rest of us avert our eyes and wait for those in mourning to stop being sad, to let go, to move on, to cheer up. And if they don’t—if they have loved too deeply, if they do wake each morning thinking, I cannot continue to live—well, then we pathologize their pain; we call their suffering a disease. We do not help them; we tell them that they need to get help.

Nobody knew about my sexual escapades. I kept waiting for them to cure me, or for something to cure me of them. Two years had passed since my mother’s death, and I still couldn’t live without her, but I also couldn’t live with myself. I decided to tell Mark the truth. The list was long. I practiced what I would say, trying to say it in the least painful way. It was impossible. It was time.

Mark sat in the living room playing his guitar. He was working as an organizer for a nonprofit environmental agency, but his real ambition was to be a musician. He had just formed his first band and was writing a new song, finding it as he went along. I told him that I had something to tell him and that it was not going to be easy. He stopped playing and looked at me, but he kept his hands on the guitar, holding it gently. This man whom I’d loved for years, had loved enough to marry, who had been with me through my mother’s death and the aftermath, who’d offered to go down on me in the gentlest of ways, who would do anything, anything for me, listened as I told him about the Technically Still a Virgin Mexican Teenager, the Prematurely Graying Wilderness Guide, the Recently Unemployed Graduate of Juilliard.

He fell straight forward out of his chair onto his knees and then fainted onto the floor. His guitar went with him and it made clanging, strumming, hollow sounds as it went. I attempted to rub his back. He screamed for me to get my hands off him. Later, he calmly told me that he wanted to kill me. He promised he would if I’d given him AIDS.

Women are used to the bad behavior of men. We eroticize and congratulate it and in return we brace ourselves to be dissatisfied, duped, deceived, dumped, and dicked around. I had broken the rules. Even among our group of alternative, left-wing, hippie, punk-rock, artsy politicos, I was viewed by many as the worst kind of woman: the whore, the slut, the adulteress, the liar, the cheat. And to top it all off, I had wronged the best of men. Mark had been faithful to me all along.
He moved out and rented a room in the attic of a house. Slowly we told our friends. The Insanely Young, Insanely Happy, Insanely in Love Married Couple was coming apart. First, they were in disbelief. Next, they were mad, or several of them—not at us, but at me. One of my dearest friends took the photograph of me she kept in a frame in her bedroom, ripped it in half, and mailed it to me. Another made out with Mark. When I was hurt and jealous about this I was told that perhaps it was exactly what I needed: a taste of my own medicine. I couldn't rightfully disagree, but still my heart was broken. I lay alone in our bed feeling myself almost levitate from the pain.

We couldn't decide whether to get divorced or not. We went to a marriage counselor and tried to work it out. Months later, we stopped the counseling and put the decision on hold. Mark began to date. He dated one of those women who, instead of a purse, carried a teeny-weeny backpack. He dated a biologist who also happened to be a model. He dated a woman I'd met once who'd made an enormous pot of very good chili of which I'd eaten two bowls.

His sex life temporarily cured me of mine. I didn't fuck anyone, and I got crabs from a pair of used jeans I'd bought at a thrift store. I spent several days eradicating the translucent bugs from my person and my apartment. Then the Teeny-Weeny Backpack Woman started to play tambourine in Mark's budding band. I couldn't take it anymore. I went to visit a friend in Portland and decided to stay. I met a man: a Punk Rocker Soon to Be Hopelessly Held Under the Thumb of Heroin. I found him remotely enchanting. I found heroin more enchanting. Quickly, without intending to, I slipped into a habit. Here, I thought. At last.

By now Mark pretty much hated me, but he showed up in Portland anyway and dragged me back home. He set a futon down for me in the corner of his room and let me stay until I could find a job and an apartment. At night we lay in our separate beds fighting about why we loved and hated each other so much. We made love once. He was cheating on someone for the first time. He was back with the Biologist Who Also Happened to Be a Model, and he was cheating on her with his own wife. Hmm, we thought. What's this?

But it was not to be. I was sorry. He was sorry. I wasn't getting my period. I was really, really, really sorry. He was really, really, really mad. I was pregnant by the Punk Rocker Soon to Be Hopelessly Held Under the Thumb of Heroin. We were at the end of the line. We loved each other, but love was not enough. We had become the Insanely Young, Insanely Sad, Insanely Messed-up Married Couple. He wanted me gone. He pulled the blankets from my futon in his room and flung them down the stairs.

I sat for five hours in the office of an extremely overbooked abortion doctor waiting for my abortion. The temperature in the room was somewhere around fifty-six degrees. It was packed with microscopically pregnant women who were starving because we had been ordered not to eat since the night before. The assistants of the Extremely Overbooked Abortion Doctor did not want to clean up any puke.

At last, I was brought into a room. I was told to undress and hold a paper sleeve around myself. I was given a plastic breast and instructed to palpate it, searching for a lump of cancer hidden within its depths, while I waited for my abortion. I waited, naked, palpating, finding the cancer over and over again. The Extremely Overbooked Abortion Doctor needed to take an emergency long-distance phone call. An hour went by. Finally, she came in.

I lay back on the table and stared at a poster on the ceiling of a Victorian mansion that was actually composed of miniature photographs of the faces of a hundred famous and important women in history. I was told to lie still and peacefully for a while and then to stand up very quickly and pull on my underwear while an assistant of the Extremely Overbooked Abortion Doctor held me up. I was told not to have sex for a very long time. The procedure cost me $400, half of which I was ridiculously hoping to receive from the Punk Rocker Soon to Be Hopelessly Held Under the Thumb of Heroin. I went home to my new apartment. The light on my answering machine said I had three messages. I lay on my couch, ill and weak and bleeding, and listened to them.

There was a message from the Punk Rocker Soon to Be Hopelessly Held Under the Thumb of Heroin, only he didn't say anything. Instead he played a recording of a few lines from the Radiohead song, "Creep."

There was a message that consisted of a thirty-second dial tone because the person had hung up.

There was a message from Mark wondering how I was.

My mother had been dead for three years. I was twenty-five. I had intended, by this point in my life, to have a title of my own: the Incredibly Talented and Extraordinarily Brilliant and Successful Writer. I had planned to be the kind of woman whose miniature photographed face was placed artfully into a poster of a Victorian mansion that future generations of women would concentrate on while their cervixes were forcefully dilated by the tip of a plastic tube about the size of a drinking straw and the beginnings of babies were sucked out of them. I wasn't anywhere close. I was a pile of shit.

Despite my mother's hopes, I had not graduated from college. I pushed my way numbly through that last quarter, but I did not, in the end, receive my bachelor's degree because I had neglected to do one assignment: write a five-page paper about a short story called "The Nose," by Nikolay Gogol. It's a rollicking tale about a man who wakes up one morning and realizes that his nose is gone. Indeed, his nose has not only left him but has also dressed in the man's
clothes, taken his carriage, and gone gadding about town. The man does what anyone would do if he woke up and found that his nose was gone: he goes out to find it. I thought the story was preposterous and incomprehensible. Your nose does not just up and leave you. I was told not to focus on the unreality of it. I was told that the story was actually about vanity, pretentiousness, and opportunism in nineteenth-century Russia. Alternatively, I could interpret it as a commentary upon either male sexual impotency or divine Immaculate Conception. I tried dutifully to pick one of these concepts and write about it, but I couldn't do it, and I could not discuss with my professor why this was so. In my myopic, grief-added state, the story seemed to me to be about something else entirely: a man who woke up one morning and no longer had a nose and then went looking for it. There was no subtext to me. It was simply a story about what it was about, which is to say, the absurd and arbitrary nature of disappearance, our hungry ache to resurrect what we've lost, and the bald truth that the impossible can become possible faster than anyone dreams.

All the time that I'd been thinking, I cannot continue to live, I also had the opposite thought, which was by far the more unbearable: that I would continue to live, and that every day for the rest of my life I would have to live without my mother. Sometimes I forgot this, like a trick of the brain, a primitive survival mechanism. Somewhere, floating on the surface of my subconscious, I believed—I still believe—that if I endured without her for one year, or five years, or ten years, or twenty, that she would be given back to me, that her absence was a ruse, a darkly comic literary device, a terrible and surreal dream.

What does it mean to heal? To move on? To let go? Whatever it means, it is usually said and not done, and the people who talk about it the most have almost never had to do it. I cannot say anything about healing, but I can say that something happened as I lay on the couch bleeding and listening to my answering machine play the Radiohead song and then the dial tone and then Mark's voice wondering how I was: I thought about writing the five-page paper about the story of the man who lost his nose. I thought about calling Mark and asking him to marry me again. I thought about becoming the Incredibly Talented and Extraordinarily Brilliant and Successful Writer. I thought about taking a very long walk. I decided to do all of these things immediately, but I did not move from the couch. I didn't set out the next day either to write the paper about the guy who lost his nose. I didn't call Mark and ask him to marry me again. I didn't start to work on becoming the Incredibly Talented and Extraordinarily Brilliant and Successful Writer. Instead I ordered pizza and listened to that one Lucinda Williams CD that I could not ever get enough of, and, after a few days, I went back to my job waiting tables. I let my uterus heal and then slept at least once with each of the five guys who worked in the kitchen. I did, however, hold on to one intention, and I set about fulfilling it: I was going to take a long walk. One thousand six hundred and thirty-eight miles, to be exact. Alone. Mark and I had filed the papers for our divorce. My stepfather was going to marry the woman he'd started dating immediately after my mother died. I wanted to get out of Minnesota. I needed a new life and, unoriginally, I was going west to find it. I decided to hike the Pacific Crest Trail—a wilderness trail that runs along the backbone of the Sierra Nevada and the Cascade mountains, from Mexico to Canada. I decided to hike a large portion of it—from the Mojave Desert in California to the Columbia River at the Oregon-Washington border. It would take me four months. I'd grown up in the country, done a good amount of camping, and taken a few weekend backpacking trips, but I had a lot to learn: how, for example, to read a topographical map, ford a river, handle an ice axe, navigate using a compass, and avoid being struck by lightning. Everyone who knew me thought that I was nuts. I proceeded anyway, researching, reading maps, dehydrating food and packing it into plastic bags and then into boxes that would be mailed at roughly two-week intervals to the ranger stations and post offices I'd occasionally pass near.

I packed my possessions and stored them in my stepfather's barn. I took off my wedding ring and put it into a small velvet box and moved my mother's wedding ring from my right hand to my left. I was going to drive to Portland first and then leave my truck with a friend and fly to LA and take a bus to the start of the trail. I drove through the flatlands and Badlands and Black Hills of South Dakota, positive that I'd made a vast mistake.

Deep in the night, I pulled into a small camping area in the Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming and slept in the back of my truck. In the morning I climbed out to the sight of a field of blue flowers that went right up to the Tongue River. I had the place to myself. It was spring and still cold, but I felt compelled anyway to go into the river. I decided I would perform something like a baptism to initiate this new part of my life. I took off my clothes and plunged in. The water was ice, so cold it hurt. I dove under once, two times, three times, then dashed out and dried off and dressed. As I walked back to my truck, I noticed my hand: my mother's wedding ring was gone.

At first I couldn't believe it. I had believed that if I lost one thing, that I would then be protected from losing another, that my mother's death would inoculate me against further loss.

It is an indefensible belief, but it was there, the same way I believed that if I endured long enough, my mother would be returned to me.

A ring is such a small thing, such a very small thing.

I went down on my hands and knees and searched for it. I patted every inch of ground where I had walked. I searched the back of my truck and my pockets,
but I knew. I knew that the ring had come off in the river. Of course it had; what did I expect? I went to the edge of the water and thought about going back in, diving under again and again until I found it, but it was a useless idea, and I was defeated by it before I even began. I sat down on the edge of the water and cried. Tears, tears, so many kinds of tears, so many ways of crying. I had collected them, mastered them; I was a priestess, a virtuoso of crying.

I sat in the mud on the bank of the river for a long time and waited for the river to give the ring back to me. I waited and thought about everything. I thought about Mark and my boat of life. I thought what I would say to him then, now, forever: You, get in. I thought about the Formerly Gay Organic Farmer and the Quietly Perverse Poet and the Terribly Large Texas Bull Rider and the Five Line Cooks I Had on Separate Occasions Over the Course of One Month. I thought about how I was never again going to sleep with anyone who had a title instead of a name. I was sick of it. Sick of fucking, of wanting to fuck the wrong people and not wanting to fuck the right ones. I thought about how if you lose a ring in a river, you are never going to get it back, no matter how badly you want it or how long you wait.

I leaned forward and put my hands into the water and held them flat and open beneath the surface. The soft current made rivulets over my bare fingers. I was no longer married to Mark.

I was no longer married to my mother. I was no longer married to my mother. I couldn’t believe that this thought had never occurred to me before: that it was her I’d been wed to all along and I knew that I couldn’t be faithful anymore.

If this were fiction, what would happen next is that the woman would stand up and get into her truck and drive away. It wouldn’t matter that the woman lost her mother’s wedding ring, even though it was gone to her forever, because the loss would mean something else entirely: that what was gone now was actually her sorrow and the shackles of grief that had held her down. And in this loss she would see, and the reader would know, that the woman had been in error all along. That, indeed, the love she had for her mother was too much love, really, too much love and also too much sorrow. She would realize this and get on with her life. There would be what happened in the story and also everything it stood for: the river, representing life’s constant changing; the tiny blue flowers, beauty; the spring air, rebirth. All of these symbols would collide and mean that the woman was actually lucky to have lost the ring, and not just to have lost it, but to have loved it, to have ached for it, and to have had it taken from her forever. The story would end, and you would know that she was the better for it. That she was wiser, stronger, more interesting, and most of all, finally starting down her path to glory. I would show you the leaf when it unfurls in a single motion: the end of one thing, the beginning of another. And you would know the an-
SUE WILLIAM SILVERMAN’S first memoir, Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You, won the Association of Writers and Writing Programs award series in creative nonfiction. Love Sick: One Woman’s Journey Through Sexual Addiction is her second memoir. Her poetry collection is Hieroglyphics in Neon. Her essays have won literary competitions sponsored by Hotel America, Mid-American Review, and Water~Stone Journal. Other work has appeared in such places as Prairie Schooner, Chicago Tribune, Detroit Free Press, Redbook, Chronicle of Higher Education, and The Writer’s Chronicle. She’s associate editor of Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction, and she teaches in the low-residency MFA in Writing Program at Vermont College.

Skimming the Holland Sentinel, a local newspaper in west Michigan, I see a man who has haunted me for years. Pat Boone. Once again I gaze at him in alluring black and white, just like the photograph I treasured in ninth grade. According to the article, he will be performing the first Saturday night in May at the Calvary Reformed Church as part of Tulip Time Festival. I order a ticket immediately.

On the night of the concert, Pat Boone dazzles onto the stage in white bucks, tight white pants, a white jacket emblazoned with red and blue sequined stars across the shoulders. Though he began as a ‘50s and ‘60s pop singer, he has aged into a Christian music icon favored by—I’m sure—Republicans. That I am a Jewish atheist liberal Democrat gives me no pause, not even as he performs in this concrete megachurch weighted with massive crosses. In fact, growing up, these very symbols gave me comfort.

I sit in the balcony, seats empty in the side sections. It’s hardly a sold-out crowd. While we enthusiastically clap after the opening number, there are no whistles or shrieks from this mostly elderly, sedate audience. There is no dancing in the aisles, no rushing the stage. If a fan swoons from her upholstered pew, it will more likely be from stroke than idolatry. The cool, unscented air in the auditorium feels polite as a Sunday worship service—rather than a Saturday-night rock-and-roller swaggering-Mick-Jagger kind of concert.

Yet I am certainly worshipful. Of him. I am transfixed. It’s as if his photograph—that paper image—is conjured to life. Through binoculars, breathless, I watch only him, me in my own white jacket, as if I knew we’d match.

I’m not surprised he still affects me. In fact, during the days leading up to tonight, I plotted how I might meet him after the concert, for I must finally tell him what I failed to say last time we met. But in case security guards stop me, I’ve written a letter that explains the role he played in my life. At the very least I’ll ask a guard to hand-deliver my letter. To further prove my loyalty, I’ve rescued, from an old scrapbook, my “I am a member of the pat boone fan club” card, printed on blue stock, which I’ve put in my pocket. But regardless of the letter or fan-club card, I’m determined to get close enough to touch him, the way I once touched that other photograph, years ago. Time collapses as if, even now, it’s not too late for him to save me from my Jewish family, save me from a childhood long ended.

I curled up on the baby-blue bedspread in my home in Glen Rock, New Jersey, a magnifying glass in my teenage hand. Slowly I scanned the glass across the black-and-white photographs of Pat Boone in the latest issue of Life magazine. In one, he, his wife, Shirley, and four daughters perch on a tandem bicycle in front of their New Jersey home, not many miles from my own. I was particularly drawn to the whiteness of the photos. Pat Boone’s white-white teeth beamed at me, his white bucks spotless. I savored each cell of his being, each molecule, as I traced my finger across his magnified image. I believed I felt skin, the pale hairs on his forearms. Only a membrane of paper separated me from a slick fingernail, a perfectly shaped ear, the iris of his eye. Surely the wind gusts his hair, his family’s hair, but in the photograph all movement was frozen, the bicycle wheels stationary, never to speed away from me. The family itself was in tandem, legs pumping in perfect, still arcs. It was this crisp, clean, unchanging certainty that I craved.

The hands on his wristwatch were stopped at 3:40. I glanced at my own watch, almost 3:40. I didn’t move, waiting for the minute hand to reach the 3:40... trapped together, me on the tandem bike directly behind him, leaning toward him. Now inside the black-and-white photo, I see lilacs, maple trees, shutters on the windows. But I’m never distracted by scents or colors. I never inhale the Ivory soap of his shirt, never sense warm friction of rubber beneath the wheels of the bike, never have to feel loss or know that seasons
change. My ponytail, streaming behind my back, is frozen, captured with him and his family—now my consistent and constantly loving family.

For hours I fantasized living inside this black-and-white print, unreachable. This immaculate universe was safe, far away from my father’s messy flesh-and-blood hands, hands that hurt me at night.

Through my bedroom window, sun glinted off the glass I held inches from his face. Round magnifier. Beam of light. Halo. I placed my hand, fingers spread beneath the glass, hovering just above the paper, as if glass, hand, photograph him—all existed in disembodied heavenly light.

As the bus rumbled across the George Washington Bridge, over the Hudson River, I clutched a ticket to his television show in one hand, a copy of his book, *Twixt Twelve and Twenty*, in the other. Silently, I sang the words, his words, with which he closed his weekly program, “See the USA in your Chevrolet,” a show I watched religiously on our black-and-white Zenith. With the darkness of New Jersey behind me, the gleaming lights of Manhattan before me, I felt as if I myself were a photograph slowly being developed into a new life. In just an hour I would see him. I wanted to be with him—he was my houseguest, girlfriend, best friend, pet. Interchangeable. Any one of these relationships would do.

Sitting in the studio during the show, I waited for it to end. Mainly, I waited for the time when we would meet. Yes, I suppose I loved his voice, his music. At least, if asked, I would claim to love his songs. What else could I say since there was no language at that moment to specify what I most needed from Pat Boone. How could I explain to him—to anybody—that if I held that magnifying glass over my skin, I would see my father’s fingerprints? I would see skin stained with shame. I would see a girl who seemed marked by her very Jewishness. Since my Jewish father disapproved of me, what I needed in order to be saved was an audience with Pat Boone.

Here in this audience, I was surrounded by girls crying and screaming his name. But I was different from these fans. Surely he knew this, too, sensed my silent presence, the secret life we shared. Soon, I no longer heard the girls, no longer noticed television cameras, cue cards, musicians. No longer even heard his voice or which song he sang. All I saw was his face suffused in a spotlight, one beam that seemed to emanate from a darkened sky.

After the show, I queued up with other fans outside the stage door. I waited with my Aqua Net-flipped hair, Peter Pan collar, circle pin, penny loafer. Slowly the line inched forward, girls seeking autographs.

But when I reached him, I was too startled to speak. Now I faced him in living color. Pink shirt. Brown hair. Suede jacket. His tan hands moved; his brown eyes actually blinked. I could see him breathe. I forgot my carefully rehearsed words: “Will you adopt me?”

Besides, if I spoke, I feared he wouldn’t even hear me. My voice would be too low, too dim, too insignificant, too tainted. He would know I was too distant to be saved. I felt as if I’d fallen so far from that photograph that my own image was out of focus. I was a blur, a smudged Jewish blur of a girl, mesmerized by a golden cross, an amulet on a chain around his neck. Speechless, I continued to stand, unmoving, holding up the line. Finally he smiled and asked, “Is that for me?” He gestured toward the book. I held it out to him. Quickly he scrawled his name.

Later, alone in my bedroom, lying on my blue bedspread, I trailed a fingertip over his autograph. I spent days learning to copy his signature. I traced it, duplicated it. Using black India ink, I forged the name “Pat Boone” on my school notebooks. I wrote his name on my white Kens with a ballpoint pen. At the Jersey Shore I scrawled my own love letters in the sand. But I had missed my chance to speak to him. For years those words I wanted to say remained unsaid.

Now, watching him through binoculars in the Calvary Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, I again scan every cell of his face, his neck. I’m sure I can observe individual molecules in his fingers, palms, hands, wrists. He wears a gold pinke ring, a gold-link bracelet. And a watch! That watch? I wonder if it’s the same 3:40 watch. In his presence I am once again tranced—almost as if we’ve been in a state of suspension together all this time.

He doesn’t even appear to have aged—much. Boyish good looks, brown hair. Yet this grandfather sings his golden oldies, tributes to innocence and teenage love: “Bernadine,” “Love Letters in the Sand,” “Moody River,” “Friendly Persuasion,” “Tutti Frutti.” His newer songs are about God and country. Well, he sings, after all, to a white Christian audience, mainly elderly church ladies with tight gray curls, pastel pantsuits, sensible shoes. I know I am the only one here who voted for President Clinton, who wears open-toed sandals, who doesn’t believe in God. But nothing deters me. I feel almost like that teenage girl yearning to be close to him, closer.

From the piano, he retrieves a bouquet of tulips wrapped in cellophane, telling the audience that at each concert he gives flowers to one young girl. Peering into the darkened auditorium, he asks, half joking, whether any girls have actually come to the concert. “Have any of you mothers or grandmothers brought your granddaughter with you?”

I lean forward, looking around. In one section—members of a tour bus, no doubt—is a group of older women all wearing jaunty red hats. At least twenty
of these hats turn in unison as if searching the audience. No one else moves. The row in front of me seems to be mother-and-daughter pairs, but most of the daughters wear bifocals, while some of the mothers, I noticed earlier, used canes to climb the stairs. After a moment of silence, Pat Boone, cajoling, lets us know he found one young girl at his earlier, four o'clock show. He lowers the microphone to his side, waiting.

Me, I want it to be me.

A girl, her neck bent, silky brown hair shading her face, finally walks forward from the rear of the auditorium. Pat Boone hurries down the few steps, greeting her before she reaches the stage. He holds out the flowers, but she doesn't seem to realize she's supposed to take them.

“What's your name?” he asks.

“Amber.” She wears tasseled jeans and a faded sweatshirt.

“Here.” Again he urges the tulips toward her hands. “These are for a lovely girl named Amber.”

As strains of “April Love” flow from the four-piece band, she finally takes the flowers. His arm encircles her waist. Facing her, he sings as if just to her, “April love is for the very young...” The spotlight darkens, an afternoon sunset. The petals of the tulips, probably placed on stage hours earlier, droop.

After the song, Pat Boone beams at her and asks for a kiss. “On the cheek, of course.” He laughs, reassuring the audience, as he points to the spot. The girl doesn't move. “Oh, please, just one little peck.” His laugh dwindles to a smile.

I lean back, sliding down in my seat. I lower the binoculars to my lap.

Kiss him, I want to whisper to the girl, not wanting to witness Pat Boone embarrassed or disappointed.

No, walk away from him. Because he's old enough to be your father, your grandfather.

Instead, he leans forward and quickly brushes his lips on her cheek. With the bouquet held awkwardly in her arms, she escapes down the aisle to her seat.

Now his voice needs to rest, perhaps. The lights on stage are extinguished. Images of Pat Boone in the Holy Land flash on two large video screens built into the wall behind the pulpit. The introduction to the theme song from Exodus soars across the hushed audience. Atop the desert fortress Masada—the last outpost of Jewish zealots who chose mass suicide rather than Roman capture—a much younger Pat Boone, in tan chinos, arms outstretched, sings, “So take my hand and walk this land with me.” lyrics he, himself, wrote. The real Pat Boone sits on a stool watching the video pan to Israeli children wearing kibbutz hats, orchards of fig trees, camels, the Sea of Galilee, Bethlehem, the old city in Jerusalem. The Via Dolorosa. The Wailing Wall. The Dead Sea.

“Until I die, this land is mine.”

The Pat Boone Fan Club

A final aerial shot circles a sweatless and crisp Pat Boone on Masada. Desert sand swells in the distance.

This land is mine...

For the first time I wonder what he means by these words he wrote. Does he mean, literally, he thinks the Holy Land is his, that it belongs to Christianity? Or, perhaps, is he momentarily impersonating an Israeli, a Zionist, a Jew? Or maybe this appropriation is just a state of mind.

Pat Boone, Pat Boone. Who are you? I always thought I knew.

The lights flash on. Arising from his stool, Pat Boone is smiling. The band hits the chords as he proclaims we'll all have “A Wonderful Time up There.”

Periodically, growing up, I frequented churches, immersing myself in hymns and votive candles. Once I even owned a cross necklace and a garnet rosary, superficially believing Catholic and Christian amulets offered luck and protection. So I'm more familiar with Christian songs than those of my own religion even though at one time in my life, in elementary school, I attended Jewish services.

Saturday mornings, when we lived on the island of St. Thomas, my parents and I drove up Synagogue Hill, parking by the wrought-iron gate leading to the temple. We entered the arched Stucco doorway where my father paused to don a yarmulke. Here the air was cool, shaded from tropical sun. In my best madras dress, I trailed behind my parents down the aisle, the floor thick with sand. My feet in my buffalo-hide sandals etched small imprints beside the tracks left by my father's heavy black shoes. I sat between my parents on one of the benches. The rabbi, standing before the mahogany ark containing the six Torahs, began to pray. I slid from the bench to sit on the sandy floor.

The sand was symbolic in this nineteenth-century synagogue, founded by Sephardic Jews from Spain. During the Spanish Inquisition, Jews, forced to worship in secret, met in cellars where they poured sand on floors to muffle footsteps, mute the sound of prayers. Otherwise, if caught, they would be killed. This was almost all I knew of Judaism except stories my mother told me about the Holocaust when bad things happened to Jews—little Jewish girls, too.

Throughout the service, I sprinkled sand over me as if at the beach. I trailed it down my bare legs. I slid off my sandals, submerging my toes beneath grains of coral. Lines of sand streaked the sweaty crooks of my elbows. Small mounds cupped my knees. I even trickled it on my head until it caught in the weave of my braids. I leaned against one of the cool, lime-washed pillars, smudging my dress as well. No one in the congregation, not even my parents, ever seemed to notice. Perhaps they were too engrossed by readings from the Torah to see me... while, to me, none of their prayerful chants were as lovely as sand. Instead, I watched wands of light beam through arched windows glinting off mica...
in the sand, off me. I felt as if I, myself, could become one with whitewash, with sand, with light. Then, later that night, home in bed, maybe my father wouldn't find me, wouldn't be able to see or distinguish me. Maybe if I poured enough sand over my body I could discover how to hide all little Jewish girls, make us invisible. Instead, it seemed to be my own father's footsteps that were muffled, for no one in the congregation ever heard or saw him. Not as he really was.

After the concert, I slowly walk through the church lobby, exhausted. At the sales booth, buying a CD, I ask whether Pat Boone will be signing autographs. No one seems to know. A gray-haired man limps past, the word security stenciled on his black T-shirt. The church ladies stream out the door, not seeming to expect anything more of the evening.

I could follow them.

But at the far corner of the lobby is a hallway that seems to lead to the back of the auditorium, behind the stage. It is empty. No one guards the entrance. I turn down its plush, blue-carpeted stillness. My footsteps are silent. It is a hush that might precede a worship service. Solemn, scentless air. Dim sconces line the walls. I had thought there would be a throng of grandmothers lining up for autographs and snapshots. But I am alone gripping his CD in one hand, my letter to him in the other.

At the end of the corridor are two wide doors, shut. I assume they're locked, but as I grasp the knob it turns. Another hallway. I pass another T-shirted guard, this one holding a silent walkie-talkie, his ear plugged with a hearing aid. I assume he'll stop me. But my straight footsteps, the determined look on my face seem to grant me entrance. I must look as if I belong here. I act as if I know what I'm doing.

I do belong here. I do know what I'm doing.

Beyond another set of doors I reach a small group dressed in Dutch costumes, wooden clogs, including the mayor and his wife, who were on stage earlier to thank Pat Boone for celebrating the Tulip Time Festival. Beside them is another security guard, this one a teenage boy, murmuring into his walkie-talkie. I approach, wanting to ask him where I might find Pat Boone. I decide to throw myself on his mercy. I'm prepared to beg, plead, cry. I will say I've been waiting my whole life. I will say the Voice of God Himself told me to speak to Pat Boone.

The guard continues to rumble into his walkie-talkie. For a few more minutes I impatiently wait for him to finish, until anxiety floods me. Suppose I miss him? He might be preparing to leave the building right this minute. He'll disappear before I find him. Then, as if pulled by unseen forces, I turn away from the guard. I retrace my footsteps back through the set of doors.

I get in my car and shut the door. But I continue to watch the church. Maybe I'll catch one last glimpse of him. Him. Did he help sustain me all those years? Did he offer hope?

Yes. His image. His milky-white image.

That sterile pose. I conjured him into the man I needed him to be: a safe father. By my believing in that constant image, he did save me, without my being adopted, without my even asking.

At the end of the concert, the mayor of Holland and his wife came on stage to present Pat Boone with a special pair of wooden clogs painted to resemble his trademark bucks. Again, I had to lower the binoculars, embarrassed for him, unable to watch, just as when he gave the tulips to that young girl.

I wonder if anyone else in the audience felt uncomfortable when this father, this grandfather, tried to coerce a kiss from that adolescent girl? Or did anyone notice her embarrassment, her shame? No, that's not a thought that would trouble any of Pat Boone's fans in Calvary. But Calvary doesn't exist for me, cannot be made to exist for me— even by Pat Boone.

Pat Boone! Those two short syllables have stretched the length of my life. So regardless of religion or illusion, his love letters offered me improbable safety—grooved in vinyl, etched in sand.

FLOYD SKLOOT was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1947. He is the author of four books of nonfiction, including a trilogy of memoirs: In the Shadow of Memory, winner of the PEN Center USA Literary Award and a finalist for both the Barnes & Noble Discover Award and PEN Award for the Art of the Essay; A World of Light; and The Wink of the Zenith. His essays have been included in The Best American Essays, The Best American Science Writing, The Pushcart Prize Anthology, The Best Food Writing, The Art of the Essay, and The Fourth Genre, and in such publications as The New York Times Magazine, American Scholar, Antioch Review, Boulevard, Creative Nonfiction, Sewanee Review, Southwest Review, Virginia Quarterly Review, and Witness. He has also published six collections of poetry and four novels. Skloot lives in Portland, Oregon.

The psychiatrist's office was in a run-down industrial section at the northern edge of Oregon's capital, Salem. It shared space with a chiropractic health center, separated from it by a temporary divider that wobbled in the current created by opening the door. When I arrived, a man sitting with his gaze trained on the spot I suddenly filled began kneading his left knee, his suit pants hopelessly wrinkled in that one spot. Another man, standing beside the door and dressed in overalls, studied the empty wall and muttered as he slowly rose on his toes and sank back on his heels. Like me, neither seemed happy to be visiting Dr. Peter Avilov.

Dr. Avilov specialized in the psychodiagnostic examination of disability claimants for the Social Security Administration. He made a career of weeding out hypochondriacs, malingerers, fakers, people who were ill without organic causes. There may be many such scam artists working the disability angle, but there are also many legitimate claimants. Avilov worked as a kind of hired gun, paid by an agency whose financial interests were best served when he determined that claimants were not disabled. It was like having your house appraised by the father-in-law of your prospective buyer, like being stopped by a traffic cop several tickets shy of his monthly quota, like facing a part-time judge who...